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SUBJECT: FIVE YEARS AFTER BESLAN, GOR STAYS TIGHT-LIPPED

Classified By: Pol Min Counselor Susan Elliott for reason 1.4 (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: Five years after the Beslan terrorist attack, frustration continues about the GOR's handling of the crisis as it unfolded. While public focus on this issue has dissipated, a small but vocal minority of Russians has continued to agitate for the GOR to open an investigation of what went wrong on the day of the massacre. As the September 1 anniversary of Beslan approached, a number of print media raised the topic, but the GOR continues to show a great reluctance to answer these questions. Organizers of civic groups demanding government accountability in the case have suffered pressure from authorities, as well as at least two separate beatings. They have also been hampered by discord in their own ranks. In the aftermath of the attack, aid flowed into the region from around the world, but local groups squabbled over the money, and much of the money did not reach those who needed it most. In September we visited Beslan and the Mission's USAID staff visited Vladikavkaz to determine how best to target aid to rectify these problems. USAID intends to focus its newest tranche of aid on building mechanisms to lower ethnic tensions between opposing groups in the area. End Summary.

GOR Cover-up on Beslan?  
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12. (SBU) Five years after the terrorist attack on a school in Beslan in which 336 people were killed, 186 of them children, frustration continues about the GOR's handling of the crisis as it unfolded. While public focus on this issue has dissipated, a small but vocal minority of Russians has continued to agitate for the GOR to open an investigation of what went wrong on the day of the massacre. Some commentators have noted the discrepancy between the official deafening silence on Beslan when the anniversary approached, and the fanfare associated with other anniversaries, such as the one-year anniversary of the 2008 conflict with Georgia. Speaking with us on September 24, Yevgeniz Albats of the New Times said that to her distress the GOR consistently has swept the Beslan issue under the rug, and she reminisced about a Valdai Club meeting that took place immediately after the attack in which the topic was conspicuously absent. However, despite GOR hopes that the issue would fade from memory, it has not disappeared. On September 1, North Caucasus expert Ivan Sukhov wrote an article in the liberal New Times voicing a number of the questions that still remain: "Who fired first on the hostage-filled school? Where did the first explosion come from? Wouldn't more lives have been saved if the negotiations had been handled differently?"

13. (C) The GOR has shown a great reluctance to answer these questions. Marina Litvinovich, creator of the activist website PravdaBeslana.ru ("Truth of Beslan".ru), told us in a recent meeting that the testimony of the surviving hostages differed in significant ways from the official account of the events of those three days. Litvinovich had traveled to Beslan and had recorded conversations she had with the

families of the victims. "I had to take a look at the 'one car' that supposedly carried 32 heavily-armed terrorists with a gas machine," she said, rolling her eyes. She added that even Yuriy Saverev, the head of the official investigation, wrote a report that showed that the initial fire during the police raid came from outside of the school. Despite public knowledge of this information, Litvinovich said, the GOR has never officially accepted it. She also scoffed at the official statements that the GOR had never negotiated with the hostage-takers, noting that "it is clear" that this was how some women and children were released. Litvinovich said that the NGO Mothers of Beslan had tried for years to present their case on a major television talk show, but that the subject is taboo on Russian television.

14. (SBU) Muckraking journalist Elena Milashina, a friend and associate of Litvinovich, wrote a lengthy article in the August 31 Novaya Gazeta providing evidence that at least some Russian special services learned of the likelihood of the attack several weeks before it occurred. Laying out a detailed paper trail, Milashina alleges that GOR special services had inserted an agent named Abdullah Khodova into Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev's organization, but that Basayev succeeded in flipping Khodova to become a double agent. (Note: The article also quotes Basayev saying that the militants, including Khodova, had attacked the school by mistake, intending to attack a building housing Russian agents instead, but could not go back once the attack was underway. End note.) According to Milashina, once authorities realized that they had lost control of their agent, they backed off from any meaningful investigation of the Beslan attack, out of a desire to conceal their

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association with Khodova.

Civil society orgs hampered from without and within  
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15. (C) Despite the scale of the tragedy, and despite the GOR's failure to respond competently to the crisis, attempts to organize civil society organizations demanding government accountability have consistently failed. One reason for this has been GOR encroachment on freedom of assembly for Beslan-related groups. Litvinovich found a lawyer for the victims' families, and gathered evidence, documents, and photos. In March 2006 she was attacked and beaten on a street in Moscow. She told us that during the attack, she lost consciousness, but that her attackers brought her to the side of the street and kept her on her side in order to help keep her alive. They waited for her to regain consciousness, and then told her, "Be careful, Marina." Since then, she said, she has kept a lower profile.

16. (SBU) Civil society organization has also failed because of discord within the Beslan families themselves. In the highly emotional context that followed the tragedy, people who had suffered were easy targets for people with ulterior motives. The first organization promoting government accountability for Beslan was the Mothers of Beslan; however, some members of this organization began following a local charlatan named Grigoriy Grabavoy, who claimed that he could resurrect the children who had been killed. (Note: In July 2008 Moscow's Tagansky Court found Grabavoy -- whose name literally means "thief" -- guilty of 11 acts of fraud in Beslan. End note.) Those who refused to follow Grabavoy started Voice of Beslan, which has pursued a legal strategy, including opening a case, still pending, at the European Court of Human Rights against the GOR for violation of the right to life. The two groups followed divergent paths in their relations with the GOR; Voice of Beslan had trouble registering, and began receiving pressure in the form of "extremism" cases opened against them locally (later dropped). Meanwhile, according to Litvinovich, Mothers of Beslan has cozier up to local authorities, and their leader announced publicly that "no one was to blame" for the tragic

results of the attack.

Aid is also a complicated issue

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17. (C) Regrettably, discord also arose among the Beslan families over the large quantities of aid money that flowed into Beslan. In the aftermath of the attack, worldwide attention focused on Beslan and aid poured in from both governments and private citizens. Litvinovich said that much of the money had not reached those who needed it the most, and added that some Beslan residents -- including even officials -- who had no connection to the attack attempted to receive some of this money fraudulently. (Note: She did not have figures on the amount of money in question. End note.) While noting that people there are poor and that some of this cupidity was therefore understandable, Litvinovich still heaped scorn on those who allowed themselves to be co-opted by the GOR in exchange for silence about GOR failings during the crisis. "The worst thing is to see how parents will trade in their dead children for benefits -- for example, 'If you don't criticize Putin, we'll give you an apartment.'"

18. (SBU) Corruption has also complicated aid; a recent Moscow Times article reported that Beslan's main hospital that had treated victims of the attack, had supposedly received 6.2 million rubles (240,000 USD) in federal aid after the attack, but remained in abysmal condition for several years. According to the article, a surgeon had lost his job when he acted as a whistleblower. In 2007 a new hospital was finally built, but it still has not opened its doors. We observed a complete lack of activity there during a September visit, and also learned that the hospital has no child psychology department. We also noted that both the school and the cemetery are still full of fresh flowers, toys, and bottled drinks (the latter because the victims went three days without anything to drink). Those in the community with whom we spoke expressed the fear that the wider world would forget them. It was clear that the grief remained raw, and that no healing had taken place.

19. (SBU) The Embassy's USAID office is working to target aid so that it will produce constructive long-term results in the region. The level of sympathy that led to the initial massive influx of aid was misplaced, because the aid was indiscriminate and not necessarily tied to the actual needs that existed. USAID intends to focus its latest tranche of aid on building mechanisms to lower communitarian tensions between opposing groups in the area. As many observers have

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noted, the Beslan attack took place against the backdrop of enmity between some members of the Ingush community (who constituted most of the attackers in this instance) and some members of the Ossetian community (who constituted most of the victims). As USAID wraps up the current five-year plan for assistance to the North Caucasus, a representative from their office visited Vladikavkaz during the last week of September to determine how best to target aid to meet this long-term goal of greater stability.

Comment

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110. (C) Although Beslan was a terrorist attack, it remains inextricably linked to the GOR's questionable human rights record, especially given Putin's opportunist moves to curtail democracy immediately following the attack, including abolishing direct election of regional governors. The GOR's intransigence in refusing to order an investigation, or answer any questions related to Beslan, directly raises human rights concerns: At best, the government has violated the right to freedom of assembly and the right of civic groups to demand accountability from their government over perceived failures. At worst, it has shown a blatant disregard for human life, especially if there is truth to the allegation

that authorities sacrificed hostages' lives in pursuit of their anti-militant goals. As Beslan continues to be a a "third rail" issue, we will calibrate our support for Beslan's unfortunate residents according to the needs on the ground, while working with authorities to ensure that our message of collaboration is not lost in translation. At the same time, we will show our support for the civil society groups that continue to struggle for answers to their questions.

Rubin